

A trip into Mazandaran:

Behshahr prehistoric archaeology and the palaces of the Safavid era

The mysterious graveyard of Sefidtsah

The last weavers of Mazandaran: times gone by

During the second half of May a team of Swiss and Belgian carpet dealers and collectors travelled through Iran. The first part of this voyage inspired by Werner Weber (Zürich) made us discover the splendours of Mazandaran mountain landscapes.



Day one: a long ride through the crowded suburbs of Teheran leads the four brand-new white four-wheel drive cars to Qaemshar, Sari, Naki and finally into the city Behshahr, formerly called Ashraf. In Behshahr, we are joined by a jeep with a guide and a few local assistants.

There is enough time to visit the archaeological remains of Gohar Tepe where the foundations of a settlement prove there was a tense urban activity here more than 5000 years ago.



Follows the visit to the cave of Kamarband, known for the pre-historical wall paintings (now in the Teheran Museum) and the discovery of three human skeletons and a dog's skeleton approximately 75,000 years

old. From the hills one can clearly see the Miankaleh wildlife sanctuary and wetland along the Caspian shores.



On the next hill the palace built by Shah Abbas for his mother is not open to the public as it is part of a military domain, but we go back to Behshahr and visit the smaller residence he built for his wife, Ashraf. It is an elegant little castle with a very balanced architecture, very typical for the 16th century Safavid era. Nothing is left of the additional buildings.

By sunset, after a ride through a forest we reach Abbas Abad. The ruins of the castle on the lake have a romantic air that brings the Lake District in memory. Dinner is served in a nearby garden with a traditional *fessendjan* (a meat stew with walnuts and pomegranates) and hookahs as dessert. It was a long, exhausting but interesting day.

Next day, after a breakfast in the woods, and a few breathtaking views of the Mazandaran mountains, the road takes us high into a village called Sefidtsah (*white well*). Sefidtsah has an incredibly vast cemetery.



One of the *Imamzadehs* is buried here, and villagers from all around the province want their dead to share this holy piece of land. The older gravestones (kind of brittle grey freestones, or also whitish sandstones hardly

higher than 50 cm) show interesting patterns. The design is unsophisticated and rather naïve. The oldest graves do not mention a name, but most intriguing graffiti often on both sides of the gravestone. They are probably recognition signs and obviously tell something about the life of the deceased. Weavers are easy to identify: among their insignia there is always a comb.



Several stones show very puzzling abstract lines and stripes. Some of us wondered if there might be a link between the abstract geometry of Mazandaran kilims. The group had spread among the fascinating graveyard and it was not easy to convince the ecstatic group to join the cars. Some of us wished they could spend a whole week in Sefidshah and make an inventory of the tombs, but it seems, that work is already in progress.

The road into the mountains is now more some narrow track along a brook. The cars move dead slow. Wherever there is a tree, one can see a flock with its shepherd and his dogs and donkey crowded together in the shade.

The sun is at its highest when we arrive in Yanesar. This is now a quiet little place, rather desolate although it must have been a pleasant summer resort in the 19th century. A cup of tea is most welcome and the elderly couple that has invited us in their farmhouse tells us about the old days when they were staying there permanently. Now, they just spend the summer in Yanesar and their children all live in Behshahr or Teheran. The winters at high altitude make day life very hard. One of the neighbours shows us around and takes us down to a beautiful Qadjar house.



Abandoned since many decades, it is in a miserable condition. Trees and plants, wind and rain have damaged the construction quite badly. But still, one can see stucco ornaments in Qadjar style, painted walls and stone chimneys.



It provides the evidence that once, the village must have been a busy place and a favourite resort of wealthy families from the surrounding cities. It might also provide an explanation why peasants bothered to make such fine kilims in such a desolate area: a highly demanding clientele. Today, there is not a single loom in the village.

After another hour on the bumpy roads that still take us higher, we have lunch in a magnificent surrounding. Although the time was more appropriate for a high tea, kebab and delicious bread are served on a large white *soffreh*.

After a short nap it is time to go to Mitkazin, the first village where at last we meet a few weavers. This village too is a poor place with crumbling wooden chalets and arid, narrow yards. The first woman we meet, proudly displays what she is weaving and willingly demonstrates her skill on the little two shaft

loom inside the house.



We question her about the old times when mother and grandmother were making the finer kilims, how the spinning was done, how dyes were prepared but it does not provide the expected accurate information. There are hardly any looms left in the old farms in that area. The new production is a coarse weave with gaudy colours in unconvincing combinations. Nothing to be compared with the subtle weaves made in the same village many years ago. There is a doleful atmosphere in the village. This is the end of an era, definitely. And only textiles hidden in wooden trunks or small fragments hanging on the wall remind of the golden age of Mazandaran weavers. There most definitely will be no revival of the old tradition. It is all lost and gone forever. Are all the good weavers buried in the Sefidshah cemetery?

It is late now. The sky is a mix of blue and pale red and reflects on the convoy of white cars. The earthen road is soft yellow and we have to drive at some distance in order to avoid the clouds of dust. Fortunately the next village where we will spend the night is only a few kilometres away. The cars stop in front of in a single floored house with a narrow balcony overlooking the valley. Dinner is served and ends with several glasses of tea, brought to us

on circular white metal trays.



Mattresses and cushions are displayed in the main room. Ladies gather on the right side. Gentlemen on the left. Not enough ladies and too many gentlemen? We are bound to mix notwithstanding local regulations. There is hardly enough space.

Unexpectedly, as we are discussing next day's program, one of the drivers gets angry and leaves the house. We can hear his car buzzing into the night. Hard to understand what happens.

But the next morning, we leave at dawn and we definitely have to merge luggage and passengers into three cars instead of four. There is, so we were told, a dying plant in a nearby village. Well, there was one, until twenty years ago. The owner, son of the former dyer, proudly guides us amid rubble and crumbled walls, nettles and shrubs.



He hardly remembers anything from the old days. We question him about blue colours. He says pale blue was only provided by *nil* and when we try to understand if there is

oxidation involved in the process, as *nil* is another word for indigo, and it also produces all ranges of blue, he says yes, then says no, according to the way we put the answer. No trustworthy information.

This is the last stop. It is a long way back to Teheran. First we have to reach the valley and then follow the busy but narrow road to the capital. Near Sari we can see the shops along the road selling some “make yourself a mosque”, something I had never seen before: ready-made metallic minarets and domes (most often golden and green colours) are quite bulky but seem very light to handle and easy to transport.



It takes a long time to reach Firuzkuh and thereafter the polluted city of Teheran.

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